



## **Ancient Egyptian Texts for the Afterlife?**

**By Rune Nyord**

Everyone knows that the ancient Egyptians were intensely preoccupied with the afterlife. After all, among the most evocative images of ancient Egypt are monumental tombs stocked with lavish treasures and mummified bodies seemingly preserved for eternity.

But a much more specifically Egyptian practice is that of burying the dead with elaborate texts and images describing in great detail what the afterlife was like. Or do they? When one looks into the history of interpretations of these compositions, it turns out that the idea that they provide literal descriptions of the afterlife was largely an expectation of 19th-century scholars based on the texts' obscure contents and placement in tombs.



A view into the burial chamber of King Unas at Saqqara, the walls of which are inscribed with ritual incantations known as the Pyramid Texts.

The tradition of the so-called funerary texts (or, slightly more whimsically, “funerary literature”) stretches through much of ancient Egyptian history, starting in the pyramids of the kings and queens of the 24th and 23rd centuries BCE (the Pyramid Texts) and continuing in a largely unbroken tradition down to the rule of the Roman emperors in the first centuries CE. While many individual “spells” or “chapters” are known from multiple tombs, there was never a set canon, and the texts are typically personalized by inserting the name of the individual tomb owner as the topic, speaker, or addressee of the texts. Most monuments show a motley collection of texts with multiple speakers and speech situations, filled with obscure and seemingly contradictory mythological allusions. No wonder, then, that a simple, unifying explanation capable of reducing this cacophony was quickly sought by pioneering 19th-century scholars.



The owner (right) performs ritual services for groups of gods in text and image in a 4th-century BCE Book of the Dead manuscript.

The idea that the texts provide a literal description of the afterlife is attractive for other reasons as well. Firstly, since we have no independent information on what the ancient Egyptians thought the afterlife was like, there is nothing in the texts to contradict this idea. Secondly, this way of reading the texts made it possible to provide answers to the main question on modern scholars' minds, namely what Egyptians believed about life after death, conceived in classical 19th-century fashion as a quest for individual salvation.

However, this interpretation has also caused problems since the outset. While this understanding of the text is highly convenient for modern scholars, it does not explain why the Egyptians put the texts in tombs where – in the ideal case of an undisturbed tomb – no one would be able to read them. Various speculations were presented to account for this: perhaps the texts were a guidebook informing the deceased of what was going to happen (but then why is it not worded like a guidebook, and why are individual exemplars so widely different?), or perhaps it was a sort of passport granting free passage (but then why would all the mythological utterances and descriptions be necessary?).

For the most part, however, the advantages have outweighed the problems, and the interpretation of funerary texts as literal descriptions of ancient Egyptian afterlife beliefs has become deeply entrenched both in scholarship and more popular conceptions.





The most famous scene of the Book of the Dead (here from the papyrus of Ani), where the heart of the owner (left) is weighed against the feather of Truth (right). Long regarded as representing a post-mortem judgment of sins along the lines of popular Christianity, the accompanying text is now known to relate to initiation in the temple cult in its ancient Egyptian context.



Book of the Dead of the Priest of Horus, Imhotep (Imuthes) ca. 332–200 B.C.

If the conventional interpretation of Egyptian funerary texts is thus largely speculative and driven by the questions that have traditionally interested modern scholars, what might a different understanding rooted in the role the texts played for the ancient Egyptian look like? One aspect that has become increasingly clear in recent scholarship, and which is a useful point of departure for a rethinking, is that more and more individual “spells” can be shown, or reasonably assumed, to originate in contexts outside of the domain of funerals. Some such texts seem to come from temple rituals, while others stem from smaller-scale rituals of healing and protection, occurring side-by-side with compositions more clearly connected to funerary rituals or the ancestor cult. This indicates that we should shift our understanding of the texts away from literal descriptions of the afterlife – how could they be, if their primary use had nothing to do with death or the afterlife?

To get a better sense of the function of the funerary texts, we thus need to think of them alongside other ritual texts, with which they turn out to have a lot in common. A characteristic feature of Egyptian ritual texts (and those of many other cultures) is the application of mythological patterns analogous to the situation that the ritual seeks to influence. This is easiest to illustrate when the situation is concrete and well defined, as in rituals of healing. For example, a ritual for a patient stung by a scorpion might draw on the mythological situation of the young god Horus who was brought up in the marshes of the Nile Delta under his mother Isis’s protection from dangerous animals. By identifying the patient with Horus (and perhaps secondarily or by implication the healer with Isis), a pattern is established to which the ritual, if successful,

makes the real-life situation conform. In simple terms, the patient becomes protected and healed just like Horus was protected and healed.

This basic mechanism is found across Egyptian ritual practices whether private, cultic, or funerary. Rather than taking such mythological descriptions literally because they happen to be written in a tomb, we should in all cases see them as deliberate uses of conceptual patterns from mythology to affect real-life situations. This also helps us understand why funerary texts so often appear to be contradictory, which would be a real problem if they provided literal descriptions of the afterlife, but is perfectly acceptable in a ritual as long as the underlying conceptual patterns are compatible.

But what can the funerary texts then tell us about ancient Egyptian thought about life and death, if we cannot simply read them literally as statements of afterlife beliefs? To address this question, we need to look at the texts at a more general level of what mythological patterns they deploy and include considerations of where the texts may have originated – before being written on a tomb wall or funerary papyrus.

Not surprisingly, much of the mythology is modeled on the fate of the murdered god Osiris who provided a precedent for every person who died. Central in the mythology is the theme of kingship being passed on to Osiris's legitimate heir, who was not merely a manifestation of the dead father's life force, but also took over his social role. This concept is thus less about the kind of personal salvation scholars steeped in popular Christianity expected to find, and more about the balance of the interrelationship between the living and the ancestors in social life.

But the mythology and concepts in the funerary texts are much richer than just the Osiris mythology. Other frequent roles taken up by the deceased are that of the creator god Atum and other primeval beings. This can be understood within the conceptual framework of Egyptian creation myths where the myriad things of the created world are continuously brought into being from a unitary source. The movement of the deceased is essentially the opposite, as he or she regresses from a distinct individual back towards the primeval unity. This ontological regression or "reset button" is closely connected with the status of being an ancestor, but is also drawn upon by the priesthood in the temple cult, or healers in private rituals. In this manner, the funerary texts can indeed tell us much about Egyptian thoughts about death and life, but only if we abandon the 19th-century intuition that they provide literal descriptions of the tribulations leading to personal salvation and eternal life.

***Rune Nyord is Assistant Professor of Ancient Egyptian Art and Archaeology at Emory University.***

Further reading:

["Taking Ancient Egyptian Mortuary Religion Seriously": Why Would We, and How Could We? – Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections \(egyptianexpedition.org\)](#)

[On interpreting ancient Egyptian funerary texts | Nyord | Claroscuro](#)

[ANE TODAY – 202002 – Servant Figurines from Egyptian Tombs: Whom Did They Depict, and How Did They Work? – American Society of Overseas Research \(ASOR\)](#)